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SUBJECT: CITIZENSHIP HARDSHIPS GREATER FOR HIGHLAND WOMEN THAN MEN

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Sensitive but Unclassified; Please handle accordingly.

Summary

1. (SBU) Though the Thai government has increased its efforts to streamline the naturalization process for members of hill tribes, corruption at the tribal and local government level and inherent ethnic biases have delayed progress, especially for women. Because most hill tribes are located in remote areas in Thailand, many of their members lack proper birth records, and therefore, are not entitled to government welfare programs, legal property rights or the ability to move outside designated areas. Hill tribe women encounter further obstacles as cultural norms and gender biases confine them to a certain socioeconomic level that hampers their access to citizenship information. Moreover, by not having legal status, women face additional risks such as human trafficking and insufficient pre-natal health care. End Summary

Citizenship Complications Greater for Highland Women than Men

2. (SBU) According to official government and NGO estimates, there are approximately 900,000 highland people in Thailand (nearly all in the north), 420,000 of whom do not have citizenship. NGOs, such as the Inter Mountain Peoples Education and Culture in Thailand Association (IMPECT) and the Center for Redressing Problems for Highlanders, maintain that the majority of stateless persons are women, though no numbers are available to evaluate the extent of the gender gap in citizenship attainment. External corruption and internal social barriers are the main factors putting highland women at a disadvantage in securing legal status.

Highland Women Weighed Down by Local Corruption

3. (SBU) Externally, corruption between village leaders - who act as middlemen in facilitating the naturalization process and provide needed birth documents - and local government officials - who grant citizenship - have held up the process, especially for women. NGOs acknowledge that the central government has improved its laws and has increased its budget to better facilitate citizenship registration, but implementation has been complicated by inefficiency and local level corruption. For example, although legally there is no processing cost for citizenship papers, highlanders claim to have paid anywhere from 3,000 to 15,000 Baht (USD 90 to 450), which they allege is divvied up among tribal leaders and government officials. Other

problems that have contributed to inefficiency include processing delays in district offices due to a lack of central pressure; a poor understanding of the naturalization process by local officials; and inherent ethnic biases that make some local officials reluctant to give hill tribe members citizenship.

¶4. (SBU) Under these conditions, highland women prove to be more vulnerable and face more difficulties than men. Activists say that women tend to fit the mold of hill tribe gender roles by being characteristically docile and introverted, and therefore, are at a disadvantage when faced with a tedious naturalization process and uncooperative officials. Highland women also have few economic opportunities outside of the home, and therefore may not have enough personal income to afford the under-the-table asking price for citizenship registration. In addition, women are more susceptible to sexual advances by district officials, with IMPECT representatives stating they have encountered cases where women have solicited themselves in exchange for speeding up delays in citizenship registration.

Internal Social Barriers Impede Access to Citizenship

¶5. (SBU) Internally, tribal customs and traditions have subjected highland women to a lower socioeconomic level than that of men. Predicated on the view that a woman's role is restricted to the home, this social status limits hill tribe women's access to post-primary education, political opportunities and knowledge of the citizenship process. According to the Center for Redressing Problems for Highlanders, currently no members of Parliament and a disproportionately low number of elected sub-district officials are hill tribe women. Literacy rates are low among hill tribe groups, especially among

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the women (highland activists estimate that 30% of hill tribe women and 50% of men are literate). Some highland parents place little value on a daughter's education and her knowledge of the Thai language, reasoning that she will be married off anyway and time would be better spent working and contributing to the family income. With limited educational and political opportunities, most hill tribe women do not possess enough information about the citizenship process or speak enough Thai to pursue legal status individually and must rely on village leaders, many of whom are allegedly corrupt, for guidance and needed documents.

Larger Risks for Undocumented Highland Women

¶6. (SBU) In addition to facing more complications than men in securing citizenship, highland women also encounter more risks by not having legal status. According to the UNESCO Highland Peoples Survey, lack of citizenship is the greatest risk factor for females to be trafficked. This report also concludes that those without citizenship are 73% less likely to enter primary school and 98% less likely to pursue higher education. Undocumented women also face exacerbated health risks during pregnancy or labor, since they are without access to government-sponsored health care or do not have the money to see a private doctor. According to IMPECT, the Central Government has only slightly improved in recent years with regard to increasing health care for stateless persons.

Emergent Progress in Citizenship Laws and Education

¶7. (SBU) In recent years there have been considerable improvements in the citizenship process, leading to an increase

in the number of stateless persons receiving legal status. Due to coordination efforts among NGOs, hill tribe members and the central government, more legal channels have opened up and more people are becoming informed about their citizenship rights. In the past ten years, registration numbers have increased by 100,000 people. The 2008 Nationality Act, which took effect in February, has dramatically sped up citizenship registration by decentralizing final authority from the Ministry of Interior to district offices. A process that once took up to many years can now be completed within 90 days. Additionally, children who are born in Thailand to stateless parents can now apply for citizenship and are not considered illegal or at risk for deportation. Another sign of progress is that more highland girls are receiving an education, which is helping to change the image of female roles in hill tribe society. NGO representatives have observed rising literacy rates among hill tribe men and women, but contend that their Thai language skills are still very basic and insufficient to navigate the citizenship process on their own.

Comment

18. (SBU) Citizenship attainment for highlanders has been steadily increasing due to more favorable laws and grassroots efforts to register stateless persons. However, hill tribe women will continue to be more disadvantaged than men in attaining citizenship until they can break out of the traditional social mold and until local corruption is curtailed.
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